

Semiotic Study of Cyberbullying in the Film *Budi Pekerti* by Wregas Bhanuteja: An Andragogical Perspective

Casi Yuniatun

Universitas Nasional

E-mail: casi@civitas.unas.ac.id

Fathu Rahman

Hasanuddin University

E-mail: fathu.rahman@unhas.ac.id

Fairuz

Universitas Nasional

E-mail: fairuz.civitas@unas.ac.id

ABSTRACT

*This study examines cases of bullying. Bullying is a continuous act of harming someone without compassion that occurs within society. Forms of bullying can be physical or verbal. Physical bullying includes actions such as pushing, hitting, kicking, or damaging another person's belongings. Verbal bullying includes spreading slander, mocking, insulting, threatening, intimidating, and similar behaviors. The impacts of bullying can include trauma, mental disorders, and self-harm, as well as mental health problems such as depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders. In addition, bullying victims may experience a decline in academic performance and social isolation. Bullying can occur anywhere—in the family environment, neighborhood, workplace, or school. This study aims to (1) represent the bullying phenomena depicted in the film *Budi Pekerti*, and (2) analyze the denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and social myths constructed within the film's narrative using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach through a qualitative descriptive method. The data were obtained from the film *Budi Pekerti* by Wregas Bhanuteja. The findings show that the most prominent forms of bullying are verbal bullying and cyberbullying, including Flaming (7 instances), Harassment (6 instances), Denigration (4 instances), and Outing (2 instances). The bullying experienced by the protagonist and their family results from misunderstandings that force the character to resign from their job and move house with their family.*

Keywords: *Andragogy, Budi Pekerti, Film, Social Media, Cyberbullying, Roland Barthes' Semiotics.*

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1. Introduction

Humans are social beings who cannot live entirely on their own. They depend on one another and need interaction and communication with others. The rapid advancement of information and communication technology, such as the internet, clearly offers many benefits for human life. This development provides an open space—a medium that allows people to create places where they can express their social aspirations. The internet offers diverse information, educational media, games, and social interaction that are easily accessible online anytime and anywhere. Social media, including online chat applications, is highly useful and makes it easier to interact with others without meeting face to face (Attahakul, 2024; Mochammad et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2019).

Today, there are various applications that enable users to share information, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and others. Two-way communication has become increasingly easy because social media has grown popular as a channel for exchanging information and a space for self-expression. Every post—whether a photo, video, or text—carries meaning or a message to be conveyed to other users (Nikitento et al., 2024.; Wu & Gong, 2023; Junaid et al., 2025). However, technological development not only offers advantages but also brings negative impacts when misused, one of which is the phenomenon of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is a form of aggressive and intimidating behavior that repeatedly attacks a victim's psychology by hurting, frightening, or humiliating them using electronic media such as mobile phones, computers, or other digital devices (Serban & Malizia, 2025). It can occur through messages containing threats, insults, slander, or harassment. According to Ghosh et al., (2025) cyberbullying may also involve disclosing personal information without permission, spreading false or fake news, or creating fake social media accounts to damage someone's reputation.

Cyberbullying has significant consequences for the victim's mental, emotional, and social well-being, including risks of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and even suicide. Several factors can contribute to bullying, such as lack of family attention, domestic violence, environmental conditions, poor teacher supervision at school, and a lack of discipline in dealing with perpetrators (Nuseir et al., 2023; Hamuddin et al., 2023). Given the high incidence of bullying in schools in Indonesia and worldwide, this phenomenon must not be ignored and requires serious attention.

Based on real-life events and phenomena, many issues of cyberbullying have been explored and adapted into films. Torun, (2025) stated that a film is a work of art that presents a storyline in an audiovisual format and serves not only as entertainment and a source of information but also as a cultural tool that can influence public opinion. As a form of communication, film combines visual and audio elements sequentially to create a narrative.

Films play a role as an effective medium to convey messages, ideas, information, and education to the public in a way that is easily received and understood (Kankal, 2025; Sosrohadi & Wulandari, 2022). The messages or information presented in a film provide viewers with new knowledge and learning opportunities, helping them grasp the intended message. The wide variety of films available allows directors to shape their work into an educational tool that resonates with audiences (Orankiewicz & Adamczak, 2025; Rahman et al., 2023). Lessons conveyed through a film are expected to have a positive impact on viewers.

Verbal violence or cyberbullying in a film can be analyzed using a semiotic approach. Semiotics is known as the study or analytical method used to examine signs, sign systems, and the formation of meaning in communication. According to Sobur (2009), semiotics is generally the science or analytical method for studying signs. Signs are tools we use to navigate the world and to interact with others.

Films often contain signifiers and signified that can be explored through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. Barthes expanded Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs, introducing two levels of interpretation: denotation and connotation (Barthes, 1957). Denotation is the most basic level of meaning—the literal or explicit meaning of a sign, which can be a word, image, or symbol. Connotation, on the other hand, is a figurative or additional meaning that goes beyond the literal sense. Connotative meaning can be positive or negative depending on cultural norms and social values. Barthes also added the concept of myth as a cultural meaning attached to signs (Barthes, 1967). A myth is a process of creating symbolic meaning—often ideological and hidden—connected to concepts or values, so that an image, object, or phrase acquires symbolic significance.

One recent film that portrays cyberbullying and serves as the object of this study is Budi Pekerti (*Andragogy*), directed by Wregas Bhanuteja. This film is set in the Special Region of Yogyakarta during the Covid-19 pandemic. Its synopsis centers on the life of Prani Siswoyo, a guidance counselor at SMP Pengemban Utama, who lives with her husband—suffering from depression due to a failed business venture during the pandemic—and their two children, Tita and Muklas (Salsabila & Zuhria, 2024).

The conflict begins when a video of Mrs. Prani is secretly recorded by people in a market as she scolds someone for not queuing for Mbok Rahayu's putu cake. Although she merely intended to remind other customers to follow the queue, her action becomes the starting point of bullying directed at her and her family. The video is then uploaded to social media in an incomplete form, showing only her anger and making it seem as if she is cursing. The clip goes viral, drawing harsh criticism and negative comments. Netizens deem her behavior inappropriate for a teacher, who is expected to be a role model.

As the video spreads to her workplace, the school principal and colleagues become aware of it. The viral clip results in Mrs. Prani being ostracized at school, while her family is also drawn into the bullying. Their peace is disturbed as both the community and netizens continue to look for their faults. Moreover, Mrs. Prani receives many

accusations and slander because of the viral video, eventually prompting her to resign from her job and move with her family. Her experience illustrates the destructive impact of cyberbullying on individuals and families.

Budi Pekerti tells the story of cyberbullying through the act of uploading and distributing personal information without consent to publicly humiliate the victim. Netizens ignore the fact that the viral video severely affects Mrs. Prani and her family. The widespread support for false news, or hoaxes, is evident in the way the school distances itself, leaving her to resolve the issue alone without involving the institution (Stefano & Arjawa, 2024).

Director Wregas Bhanuteja chose the title Budi Pekerti—meaning “good character” or “virtue”—because it represents human morality, conduct, and manners based on social norms and religion. He was moved by the rise of bullying, particularly cyberbullying, and wanted to highlight the importance of seeking the truth rather than relying solely on social media content. The film portrays an admirable teacher who is firm yet gentle with her students and ends with Mrs. Prani leaving her school and moving with her family to start a new chapter.

This drama film addresses issues that are increasingly prevalent in society. Budi Pekerti earned Prilly Latuconsina (who plays Tita, Mrs. Prani’s daughter) her first Citra Award at the 2023 Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) for Best Supporting Actress. Likewise, Sha Ine Febriyanti, who plays Mrs. Prani, won her first Citra Award for Best Actress at the same event. The film also received the Best International Feature Film award at the prestigious Santa Barbara International Film Festival (SBIFF) in 2024.

The researchers aim to uncover hidden meanings related to the forms of cyberbullying depicted in the film Budi Pekerti. Roland Barthes’ theory serves as the analytical framework to reveal the signs within the film’s scenes and how these signs generate meaning within the narrative context.

Cyberbullying is an increasingly urgent social problem. Social media provides a vast platform for interaction, misinformation, and negative behavior. Budi Pekerti, directed by Wregas Bhanuteja, explores this theme in a deep and reflective way, portraying the psychological and social impact of cyberbullying through the story of Mrs. Prani, who becomes a victim after a viral video shows her in a moment of conflict.

The harassment is manifested in cruel comments and threats received by Mrs. Prani and her family on social media. Deception occurs when her personal information is shared by certain individuals to further shame and harm her. Through its portrayal, the film functions not only as entertainment but also as an educational tool on the ethics of communication on social media, encouraging viewers to reflect on their own online interactions and the effects of their actions on others.

Through the character of Mrs. Prani, a symbol of many real-life victims of online bullying, the film delivers a message about empathy and responsibility in sharing

information. Furthermore, Budi Pekerti illustrates how cyberbullying can extend beyond the digital realm and profoundly affect the victim's real life. The psychological damage caused by such bullying can lead to stress, anxiety, and even depression. Within the film's context, we witness the family's struggle to protect themselves from public criticism and their efforts to cope with the situation.

Overall, Budi Pekerti reflects human experiences in the digital era and the challenges that arise when communication ethics are neglected. With a compelling and emotional narrative, the film raises awareness of the dangers of cyberbullying and emphasizes the importance of empathy and responsible online interaction. This research examines how visual, verbal, and symbolic signs in the film represent cyberbullying, using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to explain the meanings embedded in the film.

According to Sobur (2009), citing Kempson, philosophers and linguists highlight three aspects in explaining meaning: (a) explaining the natural meaning of words, (b) describing sentences naturally, and (c) explaining meaning in the communication process. By revealing the signs and meanings within the film, it is expected that viewers can grasp the messages behind each scene and the intentions of the filmmaker.

Based on the problem statements above, the objectives of this research are threefold. First, it aims to identify semiotic signs that represent cyberbullying in the film. Second, it seeks to analyze the meanings constructed through the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, following Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. Finally, this study intends to explain how the film constructs social realities related to cyberbullying and public morality.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous Studies

Research relevant to bullying has been conducted by several scholars, including the following:

Eliya et al. carried out a study titled "*Perundungan Siber sebagai Praktik Kejahatan Berbahasa dalam Akun Instagram Puan Maharani*" ("Cyberbullying as a Linguistic Crime on Puan Maharani's Instagram Account"). This research focused on the cyberbullying experienced by Puan Maharani, an Indonesian female politician, on her Instagram account. The study notes that it is difficult to process social-media bullying cases legally because such cases are considered complaint-based offenses; therefore, legal action can only proceed if the affected party reports it to the authorities. The researchers employed a qualitative approach using forensic linguistics. Data were collected through documentation techniques and analyzed using the Miles & Huberman model, focusing on words or sentences suspected of containing criminal linguistic acts.

Next, Prayoga conducted a study entitled "*Perundungan di Dunia Maya sebagai Perilaku Menyimpang: Analisis Isi Komentar dalam Konten YouTube 'Keke Bukan*

Boneka' pada Kanal Rahmawati Kekeyi Putri Cantikka ("Online Bullying as Deviant Behavior: Content Analysis of Comments on the YouTube Song 'Keke Bukan Boneka'"). This research specifically examined netizen behavior in bullying Rahmawati Kekeyi Putri Cantikka through comments on her YouTube content for the song *Keke Bukan Boneka*. The data consisted of words or phrases in the YouTube comment section representing expressions of cyberbullying. The method applied Willard's theory of cyberbullying behavior and theories of deviant behavior from James Vender Zender, Bruce J. Cohen, and Roberts M.Z. Lawang. The results showed: (1) the *Keke Bukan Boneka* content became a space dominated by bullying comments such as flaming, harassment, denigration, and pseudonym use targeting Kekeyi, indicating entrapment in deviant behavior; (2) networks of bullying accounts actively amplified comments, allegedly as a strategy to make the song go viral; and (3) accompanying exploitation that reinforced the bullying practice.

The third study, *"Perundungan Siber (Cyberbullying) Bermuatan Penistaan Agama di Media Sosial yang Berdampak Hukum: Kajian Linguistik Forensik"* ("Cyberbullying with Religious Blasphemy on Social Media and Its Legal Impact: A Forensic Linguistics Study") was written by Agus Syahid, Dadang Sudana, and Andika Dutha Bachari. This research aimed to examine illocutionary speech acts in cyberbullying practices containing elements of religious blasphemy on social media. Using a qualitative approach from a forensic linguistics perspective, the data came from court verdicts with permanent legal force and were analyzed with Corbin & Strauss's (1990) grounded theory. The findings revealed three categories of illocutionary acts: expressive acts representing hate speech, directive acts indicating insult and blasphemy, and assertive acts containing falsehoods.

A fourth study, *"Bully Anak Artis Lesti Kejora dalam Analisis Wacana Kritis Norman Fairclough"* ("Bullying of Celebrity Lesti Kejora's Child: A Critical Discourse Analysis by Norman Fairclough") by Wahyuni Siregar, M. Surip, and Syairal Fahmy Dalimunthe, focused on the phenomenon of "baby shaming" aimed at the child of artist Lesti Kejora. The research used Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis to examine physical-insult practices directed at Lesti Kejora's child in two news media outlets, analyzed through Fairclough's three-dimensional model: microstructural, mesostructural, and macrostructural levels. The results included:

1. **Vocabulary:** diction (formal and informal word choices) and euphemistic expressions.
2. **Grammar:** syntax, syntactic functions, grammar, and the structure of news reporting.

For instance, the news headline "Anak Dinilai Mirip Monyet, Rizky Billar dan Lesti Kejora Lapor Polisi" ("Child Deemed Monkey-Like, Rizky Billar and Lesti Kejora Report to Police") from *suara.com* uses the euphemistic expression "mirip" (resembles) in a syntactic context to imply a negative, insulting comparison of the child to a monkey.

Based on these previous studies, there are similarities or relevance to the present research in terms of addressing the theme of cyberbullying. However, differences lie in the research objects, approaches, and theories used to analyze and identify the issues.

2.2 Semiotics

Semiotics is the discipline that studies signs and symbols to uncover the meanings contained within them. According to Sobur (2009), semiotics is generally a science or analytical method for studying signs. Signs themselves serve as instruments humans use to interpret and construct meaning in their interactions with others.

Semiotics examines the use of signs as a medium of communication, the process of sign interpretation, and the construction of meaning in various contexts. It is a branch of linguistics focusing on the study of signs (symbols) and their related aspects. Signs may include actions, utterances, or written language (Yaumi et al., 2024). In film, all visual, verbal, and narrative elements—such as dialogue, gestures, symbols, colors, and lighting—can be analyzed as signs that create meaning.

Important figures in semiotics include:

1. **Ferdinand de Saussure** – Proposed four key concepts: signifier and signified, langue and parole, synchronic and diachronic, and syntagmatic and paradigmatic (Saussure, 2011). Sobur (2009) emphasized that Saussurean semiotics is useful for mass media analysis, highlighting how the signifier–signified relationship allows for reading meanings behind media texts, which are often not neutral.
2. **Charles Sanders Peirce** – Asserted that a sign relates to its object through resemblance, cause-and-effect, or conventional association (Sobur, 2009). For Peirce, the object is the component represented by the symbol. He noted that an object may be physical, sensed by the five senses, or have spiritual or imaginary qualities, with the interpreter as the third element.
3. **Roland Barthes** – Introduced “semiology,” the study of how humans interpret signs in everyday life, not only in communication but also in how signs create structured meaning systems. Barthes viewed signs as complex entities with two levels of meaning: denotation and connotation.

Barthes (as cited in Fiske) developed the concept of “staggered systems,” or two levels of signification—denotation and connotation—allowing layered meanings. In Barthes’ connotative framework, a text carries a primary, direct denotative meaning and a secondary meaning involving connotation, myth, and ideology (Andini et al., 2022; Muchtar et al., 2023). These can be explained as follows:

1. **Denotation** refers to the level of signification that explains the relationship between signifier and signified, or between a sign and its real-world reference, producing explicit, direct, and definite meaning.
2. **Connotation** is the level of signification describing an implicit, indirect relationship between signifier and signified, open to multiple interpretations. Connotation forms a second layer of meaning when a signifier is linked to psychological aspects such as feelings, emotions, or beliefs. In Barthes' view, connotative signs not only add new meanings but also retain the elements of denotative signs on which they are built (Sobur, 2009).
3. **Myth** is understood as a communication system embodied in a message. Myth is not an object, concept, or idea, but a mode of signification that conveys a message in a particular way. At this level, myth operates as a second-order signification system that generates new meaning beyond the first-order system, built through connotation (Sendana et al., 2025; Suheri et al., 2025).

John Fiske, a central figure in cultural and communication studies, also contributed to media semiotics. His focus lies in the relationship between signs and meaning and how these signs are organized into cultural and social codes. In his semiotic perspective, Fiske introduced the theory of the "codes of television," consisting of three levels:

- **Reality Level:** Signs related to physical appearance and observable aspects such as clothing, setting, attitude, speech style, facial expressions, and gestures.
- **Representation Level:** Technical codes such as camera work, lighting, editing, music, sound, and narrative elements like character, dialogue, conflict, and setting.

Ideology Level: Social and ideological codes that are more abstract, such as capitalism, patriarchy, race, social class, and cultural values organized within social acceptance (Vera).

2.3 Bullying

Bullying is understood as an act involving the use of violence, threats, or coercion to harass or intimidate others. This practice can develop into a persistent behavioral pattern and create an imbalance of power, whether social or physical. Forms of bullying include verbal harassment or threats, physical violence, or coercion, repeatedly directed at certain victims, possibly based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or ability. Bullying can occur wherever human interaction exists, such as in government, organizations, schools, workplaces, families, and surrounding communities. According to Thompson, bullying is defined as a set of deliberate behaviors that cause physical and psychological harm to its victims.

2.4 Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying refers to repeated acts of violence through digital media intended to hurt, harass, or humiliate others. It includes behaviors such as belittling, intimidating, or persistently disturbing someone online. Bullying behavior involves the misuse of power or authority, either by individuals or groups. Etymologically, the term “bully” derives from the English word *bull*, an animal associated with headbutting behavior. Perpetrators of bullying are therefore called “bullies.”

3. Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with Roland Barthes’ semiotic approach to explore how bullying is represented in the film *Budi Pekerti* by Wregas Bhanuteja. The primary data consist of visual scenes, dialogues, and narrative elements that display physical, verbal, and cyber bullying, including flaming, harassment, denigration, and outing. Data were collected through repeated viewing of the film, careful note-taking, and categorization of each bullying incident by type and context. The analysis follows Barthes’ three levels of meaning: denotation, to identify literal acts of bullying; connotation, to interpret the cultural and emotional meanings behind symbols and dialogue; and myth, to uncover the broader social ideologies and power relations that sustain bullying. This qualitative approach provides an in-depth understanding of how the film communicates the causes, forms, and socio-cultural impacts of bullying.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Findings

In this chapter, based on the research questions, objectives, and methods described earlier, the researcher presents data collected from several scenes in the film *Budi Pekerti*. The focus is on bullying incidents within the film’s storyline, analyzed through Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory. The data are grouped according to the forms and types of bullying, with explanations provided for each finding as follows:

Table 1. Types of Bullying in the Film *Budi Pekerti* Based on Coloroso and Barthes

No	Type of Bullying	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
1	Verbal	Insults, abusive remarks, comments online & offline	Words as social weapons	Speech as social truth
2	Physical	Direct intimidation, mob coming to the house,	Digital triggers assault	Public space as a judgment arena

		physical targeting		
3	Relational	Social exclusion at school and in the neighborhood	Social ties collapse under stigma	One stain erases all virtue; reputation outweighs fact
4	Electronic (Cyber)	Viral videos, memes, mocking, identity leaks	Identity becomes entertainment commodity	Virality outweighs truth; internet as trial without due process

Bullying manifests in verbal, physical, relational, and electronic forms, each using different means—such as words, actions, exclusion, or digital media—to harm and control others. While their denotations point to direct behaviors, their connotations and myths reveal deeper cultural perceptions where speech becomes “truth,” public judgment outweighs facts, and online virality replaces justice.

Table 2. Forms of Bullying in the Film Budi Pekerti Based on Willard’s Classification

No	Form of Bullying	Signifier	Signified
1	Flaming (online verbal war)	Social-media comment sections filled with curses and insults after Bu Prani’s video went viral	Flame wars among netizens using emotional, angry language
2	Harassment (repeated abuse)	Bu Prani receives continuous insults and personal attacks on social media and in social groups	Ongoing, repeated harassment
3	Denigration (slander/defamation)	Accounts spread false narratives portraying Bu Prani as cruel, immoral, and unfit to teach	False rumors damage Bu Prani’s reputation
4	Outing (exposing secrets)	Family’s private data leaked on social media after the incident	Private information is made public
5	Cyberstalking	Anonymous accounts monitor and comment obsessively on the family’s posts	Intrusive surveillance that violates privacy

Based on the findings, there are numerous instances of bullying in the film *Budi Pekerti*, encompassing verbal, physical, relational, and cyberbullying.

Table 3. Data on Bullying in the Film *Budi Pekerti*

No	Aspect of Bullying	Number of Data	Remarks
1	Flaming	7	
2	Harassment	8	
3	Denigration	4	
4	Outing	2	

The most frequent forms of bullying in the film are verbal bullying and cyberbullying, especially flaming—verbal assaults that include insults and harsh remarks directed at Bu Prani and her family. Thus, the film *Budi Pekerti* represents cyberbullying as a form of symbolic violence fueled by initial misinformation and amplified by public opinion in the digital sphere. The film also conveys social myths concerning morality, public control, and societal pressure on women, particularly in digital media spaces.

4.2 Discussion

The bullying aspects found in *Budi Pekerti* can be grouped into four main categories:

- a) **Flaming** – Seven instances include harsh, emotionally charged text messages, mocking in comment sections, posting insulting language and embarrassing photos, and using extreme opinions to incite conflict.
- b) **Harassment** – Eight instances include hurtful messages or comments, spreading false information, distributing embarrassing content, sustained intimidation, and social exclusion.
- c) **Denigration** – Four instances involve physical aggression such as hitting or pushing, verbal bullying such as mocking or threatening, and social/relational bullying such as gossiping or inciting others to ostracize someone. These can occur directly or through electronic media.
- d) **Outing** – This involves sharing someone’s private information, secrets, or embarrassing photos/videos without permission to shame, humiliate, or pressure the victim publicly or on social media. This act is a form of cyberbullying aimed at violating privacy and damaging the victim’s social relationships.

5. Conclusion

The film *Budi Pekerti* portrays cyberbullying that affects not only Bu Prani as an individual but also her entire family. Through Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis, it reveals how signs are used to represent deeper meanings about the impact of cyberbullying practices. The film dismantles the myth that “netizens are always right” and highlights how society is quick to judge without understanding the actual context. Social

media emerges as a tool for shaping a new, often manipulative morality that rapidly drives public opinion.

Symbolically, *Budi Pekerti* represents cyberbullying as a complex social phenomenon. Every scene constructs layered signs about cyberbullying. The film not only depicts acts of cyberbullying explicitly but also examines their psychological, social, and institutional effects. Through Barthes' semiotic approach, meaning is shown to extend beyond what is visible, continuing in layers that create new social myths in the digital era.

Verbal bullying focuses on the use of words and their psychological impact, while physical bullying involves concrete actions and direct physical consequences. Both reflect prevailing social and cultural norms and demonstrate how society can reinforce bullying behaviors through acceptance or rejection of such acts. This analysis provides deep insight into moral themes such as empathy, integrity, and the harmful effects of cyberbullying in modern society. The study indicates that the film functions not merely as entertainment but also conveys a significant moral message about empathy and responsibility in the digital age.

The findings show that the film *Budi Pekerti* features various types of bullying: verbal, physical, relational, and cyber. The specific forms identified include Flaming (7 instances), Harassment (6 instances), Denigration (4 instances), and Outing (2 instances). The most prevalent forms are verbal bullying and cyberbullying, especially flaming, which involves verbal abuse such as insults, ridicule, and offensive remarks directed at Bu Prani and her family.

Thus, *Budi Pekerti* represents cyberbullying as a form of symbolic violence shaped by initial misinformation and amplified by public opinion in the digital realm. The film also communicates social myths concerning morality, public control, and the social pressures faced by women, particularly within digital media spaces.

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